
THE HEMLOCK-PEELERS.

BY ERNEST INGERSOLL.

ONE day I went up to see our neighbors the bark-peelers. Our own camp was upon a flat, rocky place beside the most marvelously beautiful of trout-brooks and in the heart of the Catskill Mountains. Just at camp there was a cataract, the musical

roar of which was always in our ears, forming an undertone to all the notes of the birds, humming of insects, and whispering of the breezes among the forest branches. Across the fall lay two immense bare trunks, forming a bridge, upon which, if we



used great care not to slip, we might cross to the other side. We did so, however, very rarely, for there was nothing there but a steep hillside densely clothed with underbrush and a perfect tangle of prostrate logs, among which stood a few tall hard-wood trees and many saplings of second growth. This state of things showed that ruthless axes had been through those woods—for the same was true all about the head-waters of the Rondout and Esopus and Neversink; but it was noticeable that those who swung the axe had cut only hemlocks, and that all the fallen trunks were bare. This stamped the ruin of the ancient, beautiful forest as the work of the bark-peelers.

The use made of hemlock bark is to tan hides into leather; hence it is known as tan-bark, and when it has gone through the processes at the factory and has been deprived of its useful property for that purpose, it is spread upon garden walks, race-tracks, and the like, wherever a soft surface is wanted. In this shape everyone is familiar with it.

The hemlock is a tree which grows in damp and rocky places at a little elevation above the sea. It is an evergreen, as everybody knows, and has its twigs and foliage arranged horizontally upon the branches, so that the whole upper and under surface of each branch is flat. Its longest limbs are lowest down and there is a gradual decrease in length toward the top, while all droop instead of pointing upward, as in most trees. This gives a conical and somewhat dark and sorrowful aspect to the hemlock, very different from the cheerful appearance of the brighter-barked and more airy pines.

On some mountains the hemlocks grow in groves or copses by themselves, sometimes covering large areas, with hardly any other varieties. These are very somber woods, I assure you, but the most valuable. They are the ones beloved by animals in winter, for underneath the drooping, sheltering eaves of the great, low-limbed trees the wood-dwellers find spaces into which the snow can hardly penetrate, and so secure good housing from the storm.

My way up to where the bark-peelers were at work, however, lay through no such solid forest, but by a rough old road along the tumbling brook and upon the steep mountain side, through green groves and thickets that kept out the sun and kept in moisture for the nourishment of innumerable weeds, aromatic herbs, ferns, and late June flowers. These old roads are only lanes, cleared out enough to make a passable way down to civilization. They go nowhere in particular, are only used by the bark-cutters, by the lumbermen who drag logs down to the mill, and by occasional picnickers,

like ourselves. So small is the amount of travel, it does not pay to keep them in good order; hence they are full of holes, big rocks, and bridges to cross which would frighten any but a mountaineer, while it frequently happens that the first party to pass in the spring has to chop through a dozen or so of trees that have fallen across the track.

But this loneliness makes these old secluded wood-roads all the pleasanter as lounging places in mid-summer. Along their edges grow many more flowers than you can find in the shady recesses of the woods, and under your feet a firm turf takes the place of sodden leaves. Overhead stands a tall Gothic arch, where the tips of the branches meet from both sides, yet no array of trunks obstructs the eye as you look ahead down a sun-streaked path. Here the hemlocks had long ago been culled out, and there remained chiefly the strong beeches (which seem the most dignified and substantial of forest trees), black, shining wild-cherry trees, broad-reaching maples, lindens, and various inconspicuous kinds, while,—wherever the ground was low,—

“ Like beggared princes of the wood
In silver rags the birches stood.”

These green aisles are a fine thing for the animals of every sort which make these lofty mountains their pleasant home. Here you may see the track of the fox, and find the run-way of the wild mouse or the minute footprint of the tiny shrew, and discover the porcupine searching by moonlight for his supper of beetles or the juicy young of grasshoppers and other insects. Butterflies are beguiled hither, far from the hot outside clearings where they love to play, and you will see more birds of every sort in half an hour here, than half a day in the forest could show you. The birds love these sunny openings, both because they are warm and pleasant and because here they find many times more small insects and weed-seeds, upon which to feed, than ever exist in the deep woods.

After tramping slowly a mile or so, along such an old road, I came upon a little clearing and saw a log house, with signs of inhabitants about it. I went up to it and learned that it was where the bark-peelers stayed at night. One of them had brought his wife and children here, and the family kept house for the rest, sixteen in all.

This log house was an old affair and a large one. It was about six logs high, above which was a roof of slabs, very good in dry weather, but not of much account on a wet night. There was a low door and only one window, so that at first the inside seemed to me as dark as a cave. There was no floor but hard-tramped earth, and benches were used to sit on. Upon the first floor were the primitive accom-

modations for the family that kept house for the lumbermen. The man, his wife, and their four children occupied all this part of the house at night. Overhead was a loft, covering the most of the room below, and reached by a ladder. Here the men slept upon pallets of straw spread on the slab floor.

This was the way the party lived, and as they were not soft-handed nor afraid to rough it, it was a sufficiently comfortable way during the summer days that they worked in the woods. The woman, however, thought she should be glad when she could go back to her pleasant home in the valley, and cook for a less numerous family.

The men were at work some distance up the side of the mountain, which was a spur of great Peaka-moose, and I was guided up by a man who was taking them some addition to their dinners. The road ceased altogether, soon after we left the shanty, and it was not long before even the path disappeared, so that we had to force our way through the thick woods up the steep slope, guided only by the sounds of chopping and the crash of falling trees which came to our ears.

Most of the men were young fellows, with tall, strong, active frames and frank, honest faces. One or two of them wore red flannel shirts which looked very picturesque among the green trees, and all of them made so merry over their hard work that the felling of huge trees and lopping of stout branches seemed rather play than labor.

When bark-peelers go into the woods, they divide themselves into parties of four or five who work together. Each one of these parties contains *choppers*, *fixers*, and *spudders*.

The beginning of operations belongs to the first class. The chopper chooses the first good-sized hemlock that is seen, and it is attacked near the root with sharp and skillful axe until it tumbles headlong in just the desired direction. The fall of one of these trees, especially if it be a large one, is an impressive sight. The chopper cuts a broad opening on one side fully half through the great trunk, yet the tree stands firm and pays no attention to the blows, nor to the heavy chips that continually fly away from its dark, red heart-wood. Then the chopper goes around on the other side, and cuts a new gash, a little lower than the first one, since he intends the tree to fall to that side. Here, too, he cuts deep in before there are any signs of conquest. As the axe begins to touch the center, however, the topmost limbs are seen to tremble, then to sway, and a cracking sound follows the repeated blows which warn the poor tree that its time has come. Then there is a tottering, a little leaning toward the weaker side, which has the lower cut, and the woodman, keeping his eye

upward and his feet ready to jump, hurls one last powerful stroke into the overstrained fibers. They fly apart with a loud noise, the great crown bows toward the earth, gains swifter motion as it descends, and comes crashing down upon the weak and resistless brushwood with a noise like the muffled roar of a whole battery and a force which shakes the earth.

Now comes the work of the "fixers." They leap upon the butt of the fallen giant, and, striking at the lowest limbs, first cut off every branch until all are lopped away to where the trunk grows too narrow to be worth trimming. As fast as a little space of the trunk is cleared, one of the men cuts a notch through the bark and around the trunk—"rings" it, as he would say. Four feet further on he cuts another ring, and then slits the bark lengthwise from one ring to the other, on three or four sides of the tree. This goes on every four feet, as fast as the tree is trimmed, until the whole length has been thus "fixed."

Last of all comes the "spudder," whose duty it is to pry off the great flakes of bark which have been notched and split for him. He takes his name from the tool he uses, which is a sort of small, heavy, sharp-edged spade, with a short handle; perhaps to call it a round-bladed chisel would describe it more nearly. To pry off the bark in this way seems very easy, but they told me it was the hardest work of all, and that it required considerable skill to do it properly.

When the bark has been removed it must be made up into regular piles so as to be measured, for it is estimated and sold by the cord. This is hard work, for the green and juicy bark is very heavy and rough to handle. Sometimes a tree will be found so large as to furnish a cord, or even more, alone; but the average rate of yield is much less, so that experts calculate that four trees must be cut down to obtain a cord of bark.

It is only when the new wood is forming just underneath, and the cells are soft and full of sap, that the bark can be stripped from the log in large pieces. Peeling, therefore, can be carried on only during May and June. The cords of bark piled then are left to dry all the summer and fall, and are hauled out in winter by ox-teams with sleds, when the deep snow makes a smooth track over even so terribly rough a road as the one I have mentioned.

The bark-peelers were a very jolly lot of fellows, singing and joking as they worked, and at dinner there was one incessant rattle of stories and fun. They work hard, eat heartily, go to bed as soon as it is dark, and rise at dawn.

It is interesting work—but it leaves a ruined forest behind!

